Dick Gregory's night: insights both comic and serious

By Stephen King
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They came from all around, near and far. From the beautiful, placid Maryland community that embraces rustic St. Mary's College, all the way from the Nation's Capital and miles in between to *listen* to Richard Claxton Gregory.

But, being himself, Dick Gregory — as he is usually called — a preacher of integrity, an "overseer of the poor and unprotected" masses, was all of this Thursday night as many of the student union crowd of 1,000 found themselves captive, wondering if they *really* wanted to *hear* what he had to say.

Gregory's is the life of a crusader, the life of a man of moral discipline. And, surrounding the candid and riotous humor that first brought him to public attention as one of the foremost comedians of the sixties, there is a center, a hard, simultaneous coldness and warmness that grapples at the heart of a man who knows he "can't pray enough for this country, the richest, most powerful country on earth."

He came to St. Mary's College, quaint and immaculately landscaped, bordered at the front by the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, as a part of his continuing efforts to educate America. It is, he said, something he's been doing for quite some time, "bringing the truth to colleges like this one": three hundred lectures over a 10-month period for more than 10 years.

AND GREGORY'S "crusade for the truth" — his continued lobbying for further inquiries into the deaths of Martin Luther King and president John Kennedy, his ongoing campaign to stamp out hunger world-wide, his strengthening alliance with the long-suffering American Indians — makes him an incisive, deeply opinionated individual that some people would like to emulate. Still others, like many in the racially balanced audience at the college, shudder and shrivel, wishing they could crawl away from his imposing enlightenment.

"See, white folks don't know black folks," said the black activists and civil rights leader, in a 30 minute comedy skit that preceeded a more serious quasi-lecture on the declining state of society. "At least, black folks do know white folks. Not that we wanted to, but we had to, to survive.

"White folks say 'colored folks sure talk different.' Of course, we do. There're two different worlds. Like white folks say 'sand—wich.' Niggers say 'samich.' And a lot of white folks try to make believe that niggers can't say sandwich, when they know damn well any fool can say sandwich."

And then, he explained, "A sandwich is a little light snack that white folks eat between lunch and dinner. A 'samich' *is* dinner. Then, they want to know why black folks can't speak any English. Because we learned our English from some non-English speaking white folks. I learned my English from you. You don't even know English, but you think you do."

AT HIS MOST SERIOUS, Gregory discussed his book, "Code Zorro," co-authored with his lawyer Lang, about the alleged conspiracy to kill Martin Luther King. He was shocked at the inadequacy of the assassination hearings. He wondered aloud why particular questions were never raised, why a small train strike could all of a sudden cripple the nation and divert attention from the testimony of a cuban witness. Why, he asked, were the most widely read papers in the world — those in New York — out on strike throughout the hearings, leaving all but America uninformed of these events?

And how, he asked, could a Boston radio station erroneously announce his death only moments after an alleged murder attempt? He was not in the area at the time, he said, "I was boogying away in New Orleans." The victim was his chauffeur. But then, if he was not on target with his accusations, why would his life be so threatened . . . he wondered aloud. He was, he said, not afraid because he "has the power of a God force that rules the universe and maintains balance and justice throughout." He laid fear among the audience, wonder, surprise.